

Literacy's Influence on Our Souls

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyze how the change from an oral community to a literate society influenced Plato's perspective on the human soul. This paper speaks to the theories Plato puts forth in several of his dialogues that the human soul is immortal and that the use of literacy allows not only philosophers but anyone who can read to contemplate their own lives.

The human brain is a powerful organ capable of more than we could ever possibly know. To know is a sign of knowledge, to think is a form of consciousness and to have consciousness separates man from lesser developed animals, or at least that is what some scholars and doctors believe to be the defining factor. Humans rely on their conscience, that part of our minds that makes us who we are and allows us to make choices for ourselves and decide what is right and what is wrong. However, it has not always been this way. In fact the introduction of literacy into ancient Athens came at a pivotal moment when thought processes in the human mind changed and, through higher education, that of Plato's Academy, created the personal autonomy moderns hold dear.

Homer and the pre-Socratic thinkers, as well as Socrates himself, were "oralists" when it came to communication. Their traditions were passed down from person to person through speech and specifically through poems, private lessons, and tragedies. The use of rhythm was one of the ways poems and tragedies made it easy for people to remember and continue their traditions. Eric Havelock points out that these same rules apply to children's nursery rhymes; rhythm makes the rhymes easy to remember for little children who have not yet learned to read or write.

The introduction of the Greek alphabet enabled literacy and, in turn, a new way of thinking to the Greek people (Havelock n.d., 67). Havelock claims "...thought is prior to the language it uses and that minds are prior to whatever means of communication may be available to them" (Havelock n.d., 67). For the pre-Socratics and other pre-Golden Age Greeks, means of communication was strictly that of spoken language. Their thoughts were uniform, since their time was spent memorizing their history and lineage to pass on to their next of kin.

On the other side of the spectrum are "textualist and I will focus specifically on Plato, the first textualist? Plato was the medium of the transition from an oral to textual society in that he wrote poems, tragedies, comedies but he also taught orally at his Academy. Textualist take the rhythm part of the communication and apply it to their writing, as suggested by Havelock due to the early textualist practice of replicating what they heard as they transcribed. When the alphabet was created it became the legend

to what was being written by the early authors, the map to our philosophical soul. The textualist did not make up new words but they simply gave new meanings to words that already existed (Havelock n.d., 81). Words like *noein*, *phronein*, and *logizesthai* all received new meanings: to be aware, to have wits and to tally, respectively. Havelock's essay sheds light on the transition from an oral community to a written, textual-based community and how this transition transformed our souls.

This transformation should be understood in these terms: the soul, or *psyche*, is the center of our personalities rather than fragments of the cosmos. The pre-Socratics had the belief that the choices and actions that happened in life were impressed on them from an outside source; in other words, that the cosmos, or the gods, played a major part in the daily lives of the Greeks and so the word *psyche* received a new meaning; to think and produce thoughts (Havelock, 85), and with the new understanding of *psyche* Plato believed that moral decisions and scientific knowledge derived from the personality of the individual, not from the cosmos. All of these transitions and concepts were believed to have been brought to light by Socrates, but put into philosophical form by Plato; we can see traces of this work in his *Republic*. Thus, a new age of thought had emerged and along with it a new awareness of "self" that would change the way philosophers will view our moral and ethical being.

In his *Preface to Plato*, Havelock focuses in on the *psyche* and what it had become under Plato. As early as the beginning of the fifth century B.C., we can see Greeks speaking of their souls as personalities (Havelock 2001, 197). This change, according to Havelock, is largely due to the new definition of the term *psyche* based on the transition from an oral to literate society, which would make up the Greek language revolution. In turn, this revolution led to a change in education and in turn the way westerners learned and thought.

An oralist society, as we have said, leaned on rhythm as a poetic narrative to tell their life lessons and history. An oralists' job was to memorize stories and store information for later use but characters like Achilles cannot realize "himself" because of this tradition (Havelock 2001, 199). Achilles does not realize himself because he never self reflects about his own emotions or overall state of being. Oralists see things that happen as occurring as a function of the cosmos, not from within oneself. In the Epics by Homer, the characters see their lives being affected directly by the gods, thus they do not control their destiny, nor their own everyday lives.

With this new understanding of the *psyche*, or soul, there was the discovery of intellection; subject and object were no longer the same, but now subject existed *in relation to* the object. The oralists would have

seen their lives directly affected by the world around them, much like Achilles in the Iliad. The textualist sees the world occurring in relation to themselves, such as some of the later philosophers like Epicurus. Intellection, we can see throughout history and in our own lives, leads to knowledge, such as how rain is formed, or other scientific inquiries as well as other little things that we take for granted. The oralist Greeks in this time period took their minds for granted, they didn't truly understand its capabilities. Plato taught his students this new idea of *psyche* and the oralist began to think for themselves.

Later, Havelock claims that the *psyche* is the center of our desires and the reason we learn. It is also the center of justice according to Plato. Justice lies within a person's virtuously balanced *psyche*, but one can only obtain this type of *psyche* through higher education. So in order to obtain true justice in Plato's theory, one must first master one's own *psyche* and in order to achieve a virtuous psyche, one must become educated.

Higher education is modeled after the dialogue format. Havelock says that the only way to reach the virtuous *psyche* is through conversation and the ability to ask why something is the case. Here we see that a virtuous soul is one that questions what is said, not one that simply accepts the norm. More interesting is that in the first part of Plato's curriculum that he taught at his Academy, he has his students perform arithmetic because it stimulates the thought processes necessary to have these conversations, allowing students to ask crucial questions (Havelock 2001, 210).

Math is one of the hardest disciplines for an individual to master growing up, but adding and subtracting are not as important as trying to figure out "how it all fits together," or why it is that things work in this manner. Pre-calculus deals with functions in this way, teaching understanding of which function does what and how to take an answer and derive an equation from it. Plato's dialogues serve this exact purpose as well; they begin with a question and work through a series of other questions to derive answers, although the answers his students would have derived were not explicitly stated since Plato's dialogues ended in *aporia*, or puzzlement. This new notion of intellection based upon mathematical and dialogical education paves the way for a fresh wave of philosophizing that comes from the new understanding of *psyche* explored in Plato's Academy. What makes the Platonic dialogues so intriguing and powerful, not only then, but still today?

Martha Nussbaum speaks to the use of drama in Plato's work in an interesting fashion. His work displays a debt to tragedy but also the new separation of subject and object. Even Aristotle comments on Plato's work by saying that Plato's dialogues are composed as "prose dramas" (Nussbaum, 122). According

to Nussbaum, Plato believes that there are six different textual sources that can teach ethical lessons: epics, lyrics, tragedies, comedy, scientific and historical documents, and oral teachings. All of these sources are imitated by Plato in his work. This influence might be because of his early work in tragedy, in fact many people that the Athenians viewed as philosophers are who we view as tragedians and poets today. Reading Plato for what is said on the surface of the dialogues makes his views seem quite simple. However, to dive deeper into Plato at a more analytical level, one begins to uncover his true intentions.

The dialogues are written in a way to be interactive with the reader; their conclusions often left open to allow personal reflection. Plato wrote works in which there were no clear victors, rather the victory lies with the reader's interpretation (Nussbaum, 126). Nussbaum also points out that, for Plato, emotion gets in the way of a person honing their intellection and to become educated, one has to first tame one's feelings. Given the influence on Plato of drama and tragedy in his teachings, what does this look like in the Academy?

According to Jackson Hershbell, the dialogues were written not as primary sources for wider dissemination, but as supplements to oral lectures (Jackson, 26). This is similar to the practice in higher education today. Students attend scheduled lectures and return home to read supplemental readings for future classes. In fact, the dialogues were acted out much like a play by some of his students or could be read aloud by Plato himself. This practice forces the reader to actively engage in what is being said.

As we previously have said Plato was the medium between oralism and textualism, the one who lit the fire of transformation; it may be fair to say that Plato lectured, but the dialogues were meant to spark further conversation. To Plato, intellection occurred in conversation and this was the key to a virtuous psyche; a virtuous psyche, in turn, meant justice.

The change from an oral society to a literate community transformed much more than just the way people communicated. The new wave of intellection changed the way Greeks thought and how they perceived themselves as well. Although at the time Plato lived this new understanding of the *psyche* was only realized by the educated elite, by the time we arrive at Aristotle, it was well known amongst the populace. With this new concept of psyche the person becomes the agent of their own well-being and "self", no longer looking to the gods for guidance but joining them in intellection. This educational process shaped the way we view ourselves today in that we are moral agents capable of our own choices and personal autonomy.

Works Cited

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